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INTERVIEW

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Ivica Mladenović

WHAT'S THE POINT OF SOCIOLOGY IF IT'S NOT ENGAGED?
An Interview with Michael Burawoy

Michael Burawoy is an internationally recognized British sociologist. Born in Great Britain in 1948, he now teaches at the University of California at Berkeley in the United States. Michael Burawoy has been a participant observer of industrial workplaces in four countries: Zambia, United States, Hungary and Russia. In his different projects he has tried to illuminate – from the standpoint of the working class – postcolonialism, the organization of consent to capitalism, the peculiar forms of class consciousness and work organization in state socialism, and, finally, the dilemmas of transition from socialism to capitalism. Over the course of four decades of research and teaching, he has developed the extended case method that allows broad conclusions to be drawn from ethnographic research. The same methodology is advanced in Global Ethnography, a book coauthored with 9 graduate students, that shows how globalization can be studied "from below" through participating in the lives of those who experience it. No longer able to work in factories, he turned to the study of his own workplace – the university – to consider the way sociology itself is produced and then disseminated to diverse publics. His advocacy of public sociology has generated much heat in many a cool place. Throughout his sociological career he has engaged with Marxism, seeking to reconstruct it in the light of his research and more broadly in the light of historical challenges of the late 20th and early 21st. centuries. He has been President of the American Sociological Association (2003-4); President of the International Sociological Association (2010–14); founding editor of the ISA magazine, Global Dialogue (2010–2017); and locally, Co-chair and Secretary of the Berkeley Faculty Association (2015–2021).

Mladenović: Back in Zambia, where you obtained your master's degree in social anthropology, you were already a Marxist. Did your thesis at the University of Chicago, a place rather hostile to Marxism, which is also the cradle of the famous Chicago school, the interactionist approach and the participatory observation method build in reaction to the ambiance and the structuro-functionalism. It is very interesting that in your thesis, which was published and became the book that made you world famous: *Manufacturing Consent: Changes*

in the Labor Process Under Monopoly Capitalism, you used two competing elements: methodological tools of the Chicago School, and the interpretative framework of the French structuralists, as well as Gramsci, Poulantzas et al. Thus confirming and de facto developing the heterodox Marxist theses. This approach was very original and innovative at the time. You did your research in a factory and closely observed the behavior of the workers in this factory, seeking to answer, among other things, a question: Why do workers collaborate in their own exploitation? The idea of consent was central to your analysis. Could you briefly describe this process of consent manufacturing among the workers that you demonstrated in your thesis?

Burawoy: Yes, I obtained an MA degree in social anthropology from the University of Zambia. I believe I was the first. But you have to understand my teachers were three brilliant Marxists – a Dutch anthropologist trained in the Manchester School, a young Indian anthropologist from the Delhi School, and a renowned South African anthropologist and political scientist, also a committed member of the South African Communist Party in exile in Zambia. They instilled in me a materialist view of the world that was quite consonant with postcolonial Zambia and its reliance on the export of copper. In those days (1968-1972) sociologists in the Third World were as likely to be Marxists as not.

With this baggage I arrived in Chicago in 1972 as a PhD student. I was horrified by the provincialism of the sociology program; its faculty largely ignorant of the world beyond the United States, let alone Africa. With a few exceptions this was all so boring after the exciting seminars at the University of Zambia. As you say the hostility to Marxism in the sociology department was palpable. I began by continuing my research on Africa, especially a Marxist analysis of the then seemingly flourishing racial capitalism of South Africa. Chicago participant observation, such as it was, seemed very backward, still insisting on the insulation of field sites from broader economic and political forces as well as from history. So I was not only opposing the theoretical frameworks of symbolic interaction, but advancing a very different methodology that I had first learned from social anthropologists in Africa – the extended case method. Of course, theory and method cannot be separated, each feeds the other.

I decided to take on the so-called Chicago School on their its terrain. I found a job as a machine operator in a South Chicago factory, the diesel engine branch of Allis-Chalmers. When I arrived on the shop floor – bereft of any relevant skill – I was struck by the intense work pace of my fellow operators. Why were they working so hard to make profit for their employer? By convention Marx and Marxists regarded the economic whip of the market – the fear of losing one's job – as sufficient to drive the expenditure of effort. But with a strong union there was little danger of being fired, even one so dangerously incompetent as myself. Perhaps, it was the economic incentive of the piece rate system that drove people to work hard (as I would later find in Hungary), but again the answer had to be "no" as we were guaranteed a minimum wage. Armed, as you say, with French structuralism cultivated by my political science teacher,

Adam Przeworski, I imported the ideas of Gramsci, Althusser and Poulantzas – ideas revolving around the notion of hegemony and the capitalist state – into the factory. I postulated the existence of an "internal state" – what I later called the production regime – that was responsible for constituting workers as industrial citizens with rights and obligations, allowing them to compete for jobs, on the basis of seniority and experience, in an internal labor market, and coordinating the interests of capital and labor through collective bargaining. These were the conditions of possibility for the organization of consent in the labor process itself.

It is important to note that while I was working at Allis-Chalmers (1973-74), Harry Braverman published his famous book, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, a revision of Marx's theory of the labor process in *Capital*. Braverman traced the transformation of the labor process over the last century to the separation of conception and execution, the separation of mental labor and manual labor. It was an analysis of objective processes as though the subjective response of workers could be read off from the compulsory relations of work. I showed that this was far from being the case with workers able to exploit inevitable spaces in the organization of work. They – and I too – were creative in constituting work as a game that had its own rewards, simultaneously securing and obscuring the appropriation of surplus labor. Together the labor process and the political apparatuses of production resulted in "manufacturing consent".

Workers actively responded to the alienating character of work by working harder and in that way the day passed more quickly and there were emotional rewards to be had at the end of the shift. Moreover, workers collectively ensured that each followed the rules of "making out", so it was difficult to avoid being incorporated into the game. There I was, like everyone else, keen to "make out", even as a Marxist, I opposed this enthusiastic delivery of profit for capital. Practice trumped theory!

I should add that by a coincidence I had landed in the same factory that one of the Chicago's great ethnographers – Donald Roy – had studied. He, too, had been a machine operator in the same plant thirty years earlier. I was able to compare my observations with his and determined that the plant had moved along the continuum from despotism to hegemony. To explain the changes on the shop floor I "extended out" to changes in state-sponsored industrial relations state and the movement of the plant from the competitive sector to the monopoly sector of the economy. The study was also an "extension" or "reconstruction" of Marxist theory of the labor process, just as it was a critique of conventional sociology of work that was obsessed with the question of why workers don't work harder! Needless to say this methodology that examined the macro conditions of micro social processes was itself very controversial at the time.

Mladenović: How do you see contemporary Marxism on two levels: 1. the one that concerns its relative strengths in relation to other doctrines in the academic sphere – do you see an evolution in recent years in this matter and what are in

your opinion the potential indicators to measure this evolution; furthermore, what is the link between the weight of academic Marxism in the hierarchy of doctrines and the relationship of strength between social forces in class struggles and political forces in political struggles?; 2. The other level is rather that which concerns its theoretical apparatus and its ability to give adequate analytical answers for the understanding and necessary changes in today's social world. In this respect, is a renewal of Marxism perhaps necessary in relation to the evolution of current capitalism and, if so, in what directions?

Burawoy: More difficult questions! The last 30 years has seen a retreat of the Marxist academic renaissance of the 1970s. As the university becomes subject to market forces so pressures are applied to students, teachers and researchers alike that undermine the earlier collective and radical effervescence. One might expect there to be rebellions against the university – and there have been from time to time in many places in the world, not least in France – but in most countries of advanced capitalism the inhabitants of the university have been channeled into the pursuit of individual careers. As at Allis-Chalmers the structures of the neoliberal university have effectively organized consent to privatization and corporatization of the university – a shift from the "university in capitalist society" to the "capitalist university". Marxism has been in abeyance, out of sync with the dispositions of the times, but, of course, it has not disappeared. Marxism remains an inspiration to younger generations who have been involved in social movements – Occupy, Indignados, Arab Spring, etc. – both inside and outside the university. There has been a new flourishing of Marxist periodicals in the US, attracting a new generation.

And where is Marxism heading? Indeed! Influenced by 20 years studying socialism in Hungary and postsocialism in Russia – again as an ethnographer - I have drawn on the ideas of Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* that call attention to processes of commodification rather than exploitation, focusing on exchange rather than production. Marxism has tended to look upon markets as functional for capitalism as a process of intermediation that obscures the true character of production. Too little attention is paid to the experience of commodification, especially the commodification of what Polanyi calls fictitious commodities (labor, nature and money and I would add knowledge) which when commodified in an unregulated way not only lose their use value but destroy society in which they are embedded.

The dynamics of capitalism creates crises of profitability and overproduction that, in turn, drives marketization as a solution. Indeed, I claim there have been three waves of marketization, the latest being neoliberalism that still shows few signs of abatement. The spreading and deepening of marketization – whether we talk of climate change, pandemics, refugees, rising precarity, finance, etc. – is so destructive of human existence that it is more likely to lead to "counter-movements" than the experience of exploitation. Steady exploitation has become a privilege of a contracting labor aristocracy, facing rising precarity. I have proposed the incorporation of Polanyi's ideas into Marxism – rather than the abandonment of Marxism for Polanyi!

Mladenović: With Karl Von Holdt, you are the author of a particularly impressive book on various levels: "Conversations with Bourdieu: The Johannesburg Moment". In the preface, the presenters of the French edition of this book stated that in your scientific career, this book represents an "enigmatic excursus", and that "no other author has been the subject of such strong criticism and such constructive faith". What are the reasons for this? When did you start reading Bourdieu, what does he represent for you sociologically and how do you place him in the history of sociology? He has recently become the most cited sociologist in the world, surpassing Emile Durkheim. What do you think, from a Marxist standpoint, of the links between Bourdieu's critical thinking and the emancipatory struggles, and in this context, why do you think – at least in France – have left-wing academics have chosen in recent decades to claim more of Bourdieu than of Marx?

Burawoy: It has been an "enigmatic excursus" for sure. It began, as so much in my life does, with graduate students knocking on my door. It was the 1990s and they were demanding I take Bourdieu seriously. I had read *Reproduction in Education, Culture and Society* and considered it to be an obscurantist gloss on French structuralism; I had read *An Outline of a Theory of Practice* and considered it a poor recuperation of the Manchester School of anthropology's treatment of social action (without the unfathomable concept of habitus); I read the voluminous tome, *Distinction* which I decided was an elaboration of Gramsci's notion of hegemony, and then to top it off in *Pascalian Meditations* I would discover Bourdieu's idea of the double truth of labor was none other than my own obscuring and securing of surplus! There was nothing new here, just the unrecognized appropriation of ideas from others, most egregiously I might add from Beauvoir's theory of symbolic domination in *The Second Sex*. So I was reluctant to take Bourdieu seriously.

But the pressure from students was incessant and so I asked my colleague Loïc Wacquant whether I could take his "boot camp" course on Bourdieu in 2002. He agreed so long as I behaved like every other student. I couldn't have taken the course from anyone better endowed to present Bourdieu's corpus. As he often boasted he knew Bourdieu better than Bourdieu! And he would defend Bourdieu more rabidly than Bourdieu himself. Loic introduced me to the vast panorama of Bourdieu's writing many of which I had never read. I was seduced. I became intrigued. He was far more interesting than the usual incantations of field, habitus and capital. I fulfilled my side of the bargain by submitting memos – memos that would eventually grow into my "Conversations with Bourdieu". He fulfilled his side of the bargain by ridiculing my memos in front of the students and everyone had a good time.

I realized that in Bourdieu we have a most sophisticated critic of Marxism, especially attuned to a postsocialist world. As I would discover far from being an elaboration of hegemony, Bourdieu's symbolic violence, although like hegemony a form of cultural domination, was the antithesis of hegemony. Where Gramsci was interested in consent to domination, Bourdieu was interested in

the misrecognition, i.e. mystification, of domination; where Gramsci saw good sense at the kernel of working class common sense, Bourdieu saw only bad sense; where Gramsci saw the organic intellectual as elaborating that good sense in the working class, Bourdieu considered the organic intellectual a dangerous illusion; where Gramsci saw the traditional intellectual autonomous from the dominant class as the propagator of hegemonic ideology, Bourdieu the prototype of the traditional intellectual saw himself as an arch-critic of contemporary capitalism, never named a such!

Now I saw the appeal of Bourdieu as a critic of Marxism. With Bourdieu you got your cake and eat it – criticism without utopia, reproduction without laws, domination without emancipation, modernity without capitalism! This was a brilliant retreat from Marxism that could still appeal to social scientists and intellectuals disaffected with their place in the world. From here I could see how Bourdieu often starts out with Marxist questions in order to refute Marxist answers – all of which I laid out in a succession of conversations of Bourdieu with Marx, Gramsci, Fanon, Beauvoir, Freire, Burawoy and Bourdieu himself. And I argued that a counterpart to Bourdieu in the United States was C Wright Mills, albeit writing in an earlier era. Bourdieu was the intellectual's intellectual, representing intellectuals on their own side, claiming to speak for all, advancing their corporate interests as the universal.

Mladenović: When we talk about Marxism today, for example, it is always in the plural, because there have always been many Marxist currents. We remember that even Marx criticized some Marxists in France when he was still alive, saying that if they are Marxists, he himself is not. On the other hand, it is harder to discern sharp distinctions, lines of fracture among the bourdieusians. As a great connoisseur of Marx and Bourdieu, why do you think this is so? Is it because Bourdieu's oeuvre is as much about method as it is about theory building? Or perhaps that it does not contain the explicitly normative and teleological elements of most Marxist thought (one of the things you are disapproving of in Bourdieu's work is that he theorizes domination without thinking emancipation)? Or is there another more appropriate explanation?

Burawoy: That's an interesting question. I know so little of the French intellectual scene – although the last time I was in Paris at the time of the Yellow Vests and just before on the onset of COVID-19, the Bourdieusians seemed to be divided between those interested in reformist policy and those more committed to critical abstentionism. But following from what I was just saying, I might argue that Bourdieu's project is an intellectualist project – intellectuals on the road to class power! – that has broad following among academics, enhancing and justifying intellectual pursuits, especially the sociological variant. At the same time, Bourdieu was paradoxically very much an engaged intellectual, speaking to the people on a public tribune, although he could exhibit intellectualist arrogance if they contested his wisdom. There is a fascinating disjuncture between contempt for popular knowledge on the one side and his

stirring up of social movements for social justice, a contradiction between his theory and his practice, a contradiction that animates us all!

I think you are right, Bourdieu's oeuvre hardly counts as theory and is more a conceptual and methodological scheme. Without a clear theory that can be disputed, it is likely that his followers don't get into interpretive struggles or if they do then it is a reflection of divisions within the academy as much as links to broader political currents. Marxist divisions are far more acute because Marxism is far more attentive and sensitive to political conjunctures, to specific problems in specific countries. Marxism is a truly vibrant and evolving tradition because it seeks to partake in the transformation of the world, calling forth different theories in different times and places. For all their public interventions, Bourdieusians still largely operate from within the relatively protected sphere of the academy. We'll see if there develops a Bourdieusian tradition with different tributaries. I suspect it might follow the path of Parsonsian structural functionalism – perhaps the closest parallel to the reach and influence of Bourdieu - that was trapped and defeated by its own claims to academic imperialism, a universalistic theory that became out of tune with the times, all of which happened before it (structural functionalism) entrenched itself and developed different branches.

Mladenović: Before becoming president of the International Sociological Association, you set up a global sociology project within American sociology, aimed at making American sociology – which was very closed in on itself – more globalized, even in relation to global sociology. In your opinion, what exactly is global sociology? Is it really possible, given the existence of such a diversity of sociological traditions, not only theoretically across national borders, but also when it comes to different geographical areas and even different countries?

Burawoy: Ha! Yes, spending so much time in other countries I could not but become aware of how US sociology defined the parameters of sociology globally by virtue of its control of immense material and symbolic resources – through its powerful (highly ranked!!) universities, its prestigious (very impactful) journals declared to be "international" even though they subscribe to theories and concerns that are peculiar to the US. And, of course, it has the incredible advantage that English has become the lingua franca of the academic world. There have been attempts to pluralize US sociology, and the movement to "decolonize" US sociology have made some inroads. But you are correct that dissolving US hegemony may leave us with factional sociologies with no general coherence. Southern sociology a la Raewyn Connell has its attraction but no theoretically organized center; it exists only as a critique of Northern hegemony.

The question is this: can we pluralize sociology while retaining an inner coherence? Can we include different national experiences to deepen and enrich sociology without fragmenting it? I like to think that the International Sociological Association plays such a constructive role, especially in its many research committees.

We should perhaps distinguish between a global sociology and a sociology of the globe. If we take the ideas of Karl Polanyi seriously then I believe that the response to third-wave marketization has to be of a global dimension. Whereas sociology has conceived of the world through a national lens, as made up of national containers, that will no longer suffice. We can see this most obviously in the case of COVID-19, national solutions can only work so far, but it applies equally to the control of finance capital, refugees, climate change and so much more. The fate of the world is at stake.

Mladenović: You argue that sociology is perhaps the only social science – especially when compared to economic science or political science – that is capable of fighting the dominant ideology because its foundations have always been anti-utilitarian. As a sociologist, I am ready to believe this, and it is clear that among sociologists we may maybe find more heterodox and dissidents than among other researchers, but it seems to me that it is a bit too optimistic to consider sociology as a dissident social science? Since its institutional foundation, the dominant currents in sociology have always been more pro-system than against. It is well known that Emile Durkheim, for example, to whom we are grateful for the institutionalization of sociology, founded his sociological project around the idea of strengthening the theoretical foundations of the Third Republic in France; and he is not an isolated case, it is rather the rule. What, in your opinion, are the main challenges that sociology, or I should say: critical and progressive sociology, should confront?

Burawoy: Yes, Durkheim is conventionally seen as a rather conservative figure. But once Marx was allowed into the canon we got all sorts of radical readings of Durkheim. Suddenly people started reading Book Three of the *Division of labor in Society* through a new lens. There he writes about the three abnormal forms of the division of labor and argues that only by eliminating inequality of unnecessary power (giving workers an independent material existence to establish a relation of reciprocal interdependence with management) and inequality of opportunity (eliminate the inheritance of wealth and that would include cultural as well as economic wealth) can the division of labor lead to organic solidarity! And then if we read the second preface to the same book, we find Durkheim writing about the expropriation of private property and transferring it into the hands of occupational associations. He is proposing a form of guild socialism. Now he may not have been keen on social movements for socialism – they were a sign of a social malaise – but he did have a utopian view of the future, one that goes beyond social democracy, to include what we would today call universal basic income as the only way to assure equality of power between managers and workers. He had a very radical utopian vision of the future. Marxists might well ask about its feasibility and, indeed, its viability, but that would be a case of the pot calling the kettle black!

Weber is a trickier customer. While he is focused on the retention of bourgeois democracy with limited accountability to the demos, still his idea of

"vocation" – pursuit of a goal as an end in itself but without guarantees, does create a space for a measure of self-realisation. He even writes that time and again the realization of the possible only comes about through the pursuit of the impossible. The task of sociology as a vocation is precisely, then, to formulate the impossible that expands the realm of the possible. Indeed, I would say that sociology lies at the intersection of the utopian and the anti-utopian, the pursuit of possibilities within constraints and thereby loosening those constraints.

But I do think that the troika of Marx, Weber and Durkheim needs an injection of something new. For me that would be the life and work of the great African American intellectual, W.E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963), who brings a new vision of sociology. When brought into a conversation with Marx, Weber and Durkheim Du Bois generates a new sociology – global, historical, reflexive, attentive to race and class, rooted in lived experience, utopian as well as anti-utopian. He offers us a rich catalogue of exemplary studies including sociological fiction, historical as well as ethnographic studies. His magnum opus, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) was way ahead of its time. In my view he is the greatest public sociologist to have walked the earth. Bringing him into the canon – if canon there be – would make sociology exciting again – as long that is as we think of the canon as defined by antagonistic and dynamic relations among its members rather than some monolithic, imperial project.

Mladenović: Shortly after becoming president of the American Sociological Association (ASA), you started the project for public sociology with the idea that sociology could and should intervene in the public sphere. This sparked a considerable debate within American sociology. Would you say that you are an engaged intellectual? Or is that a pleonasm? In the same way a public intellectual is, a linguistic construction that doesn't even exist in France, for example, because being defined as an intellectual implies being publicly engaged. Could you explain the difference between the American and French type of intellectual?

Burawoy: Actually the public sociology project began when I was chair (together with Peter Evans) of my department at Berkeley (1996-2004). I asked my colleagues what vision of sociology we represent. We came to the conclusion that, in the context of the US, Berkeley sociology was an engaged sociology – my colleagues authored books that captured the imagination of audiences way beyond sociology. Even though I was a Marxist I was certainly not one of those public sociologists, I was a critical sociologist, dangerously veering toward professional sociology. I became an evangelist for public sociology when I was elected President of the American Sociological Association and that, indeed, attracted a lot of attention and controversy that continue to this day.

In my vision of public sociology I was very much inspired by my South African friends and colleagues who developed a distinctively engaged sociology in contesting apartheid and in particular in contributing to the development of an African labor movement through the 1970s and 1980s. With the lifting of the

boycott I returned to South Africa in 1990 for the first time since 1968. It left an indelible impression on my sociological habitus so that when I was President of the ASA I would even write about South Africanizing of US sociology!

Now, of course, as you say, in South Africa as in so many other countries, the idea of a "public sociologist" only leads to puzzlement. What's the point of sociology if it's not public? Sociology, by definition, is public! Well, not in the US, where the discipline is so professionalized that most of us spend most of our time talking sociology to other sociologists, writing sociology for other sociologists. Indeed, to talk of public sociology is very threatening to my professional colleagues who fear it will become "pop" sociology, losing its academic credibility. Others were critical of my endeavor as they thought I was trying to smuggle Marxism into sociology under another name. So, the idea of public sociology is, indeed, a very American idea that competes with professional, critical and policy sociologies. This perhaps reflects the expansion of the US university and the way it is organized but it also speaks to the anti-intellectualism of US publics.

No intellectual in the US would receive the celebration and notoriety of Bourdieu, Sartre, Foucault, etc. in France. Such fame is reserved for Hollywood Stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger. On the other hand, I do recall how Foucault used to loved visiting the Berkeley campus, which he did on a regular basis, because as he used to say, he loved the intellectual engagement which he wouldn't and couldn't find in the more sterile French University system, even in the Grandes Écoles. He probably saw only the best side of the US public university, insulated from a degraded and commodified public sphere.

Although I'm not a regular contributor to the media or an organizer in the trenches of civil society, I do consider myself a public sociologist in my capacity as a teacher of sociology. Here I don't compete with other media or disciplines but have a captive audience of some 200 students. I treat them as a public, that is individuals who are not empty vessels into which I pour pearls of knowledge but students who come with their own theories of how the world works based on their own diverse experiences. Public sociology here develops through a dialogue between students and teacher, through shared texts; a dialogue among students about their divergent and emergent understandings of who they are; and, in the best of all worlds, a dialogue between students and wider publics to whom they bring sociological questions and ideas. That's my idea of what I do, students may have a very different view! Another utopia that has to confront anti-utopianism.

Mladenović: Finally, you have been active in many initiatives fighting for democracy and freedom. One of the last ones was for the Serbian Institute of Philosophy and Social Theory, where you joined the international call for support that brought some positive results. Do you believe that intellectuals can make a difference and if so – what difference is that? I am curious to know what is, in your opinion, the role and place of intellectuals in contemporary societies and in social struggles?

Burawoy: Yes, intellectuals do sign lots of petitions, especially as regards issues of freedom and social justice. There are intellectuals of the right but they are still a minority. It's difficulty to know when such limited participation makes a difference, but one feels compelled to do it whatever the consequences. However, it's often as easy for the powers that be to ignore a petition as it is for dissenting intellectuals to sign one, but they do give moral support to victims of abuse, so that they realize that their fate is being followed across the globe.

I think we can do more than that. In these times when ideas of a feasible and viable alternatives are overwhelmed by the durability of capitalism it is important that sociologists keep open what Erik Wright called "real utopias", concrete imaginations of possibilities that challenge capitalism, potentialities of well-chosen existing institutions and organizations existing in the interstices of capitalism, often generated by capitalism as a means of its survival. Wright scoured the earth and came up with such examples as participatory budgeting, cooperatives, Wikipedia, universal basic income. He would talk to the practitioners, develop an abstract scheme of their principles, contradictions, conditions of possibility and dissemination and then orchestrate public debates that involved academics and practitioners. Here was the best of public sociology in action, forging a global community of real utopians, giving hope to each other as they partake in uphill struggles in the trenches of civil society.